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SUBJECT: MFA ON AEGEAN ISSUES

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR CHARLES RIES. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Greek MFA and MOD sources deny the Greek and Turkish CHODs ever agreed on fighter jets flying unarmed intercepts over the Aegean. Sources said that such an agreement would be "unwise" and that CHOD Chinofotis had no authority to make such an arrangement. Despite some recent negative developments -- including fighter altercations over the Aegean and altercations between Greek fishermen and Turkish coast guard vessels near the islet of Imia -- the MFA saw reason to be guardedly optimistic about Greek-Turkish relations in the Aegean. Positive developments included a precipitous decline in the number of mock dog fights from 500 in 2005 to 150 in 2006, as well as discussions on the possibility of a joint Greek-Turkish contingent to the NATO Rapid Reaction Force. MFA sources characterized recent incidents around Imia as nothing new and attributed the recent up-tick in their frequency to a record fish harvest in the area attracting Greek fishermen. Greece and Turkey continue several times a year to hold secret (but non-productive) "exploratory talks" (begun in 2002) on the contentious question of the continental shelf and other Aegean issues. END SUMMARY.

MOD, MFA DENY AGREEMENT ON UNARMED FLIGHTS

12. (C) Greek press reports and the Turkish MFA (ref a) have recently discussed an alleged agreement between the Greek and Turkish Chiefs of Defense (CHODs) at their November mini-summit in Athens that Greek and Turkish fighters would fly unarmed during interception flights over the Aegean. MFA and MOD sources, however, claim no such agreement was ever reached. Several sources in the MOD, including one well placed on the General Staff, told A/DATT that there may have been private discussions of this as a Confidence Building Measure8 (CBM), but no such agreement or promise was ever finalized. "No matter what was discussed,8 he said, &the reality is that the Turkish Fighters sometimes fly armed and our (Greek) aircraft that are sitting national alert, sit alert-armed." It was these armed Greek national alert aircraft that are scrambled to intercept "unknown" aircraft entering the Athens FIR.

13. (C) Deputy Director of the MFA A 4 Directorate on Aeronautical Issues Ioannis Gkikas confirmed the MOD understanding, adding that whatever the CHODs may have discussed privately and informally, Greek CHOD Admiral Chinofotis had no authority to make any agreement. Moreover, flying unarmed was impossible8 and unwise8 because it would leave Greek territory defenseless. He also contended it would lead to increased Turkish overflights because the Turks would have even less incentive to avoid Greek airspace.

14. (C) Gkikas did confirm that there were many fewer Turkish overflights during CHOD Buyukanit,s visit to Greece and for a few weeks thereafter. Also, a lower than normal percentage of the Turkish flights, according to Gkikas, were armed during the visit (he declined to provide an exact figure). But after several weeks, the situation returned to &normal.8 In fact, on January 9, what the GOG regards as one of the more dangerous incidents since the mid-air collision in May 2006 occurred when two Greek F-4 fighters intercepted two Turkish F-16s over the central Aegean. The Turkish planes, according to Gkikas, moved to within 50 feet of the Greek jets and performed a dangerous "barrel roll."

BUT MFA GUARDEDLY OPTIMISTIC

15. (C) Despite such negative incidents, Gkikas pointed to a number of other positive developments, which he said gave reason for some optimism. The number of mock &dog fights8 between Greek and Turkish jets had declined precipitously over the last few years, from 500 in 2004 to 250 in 2005 to 150 last year. Discussions on other &technical8 CBMs, such as those concerning flight safety, maintaining safe distances between fighters, avoiding accidents, etc., continued. But Gkikas said the &most substantial8 CBM was an ongoing discussion between Greece and Turkey of a Turkish proposal to create a common contingent for the NATO Rapid Reaction Force (NRF). Gkikas said implementation of such an idea would entail a lot of work, but would be &very positive8 if accomplished because it would put Greek and Turkish troops in direct contact during training exercises.

TOO MANY FISH COMPLICATING IMIA ISSUE

16. (C) On the Imia/Kardak issue, which again has been in the Greek news following the interception of Greek fishing boats by Turkish Coast Guard vessels, Gkikas confirmed that both sides had promised to adhere to the &no ships, no troops, no flags8 agreement brokered by the Clinton Administration during the Imia/Kardak crisis in 1996, but argued that the &no ships8 provision applied only to naval warships, not other types of vessels. Gkikas explained this was the key to defusing the crisis, because it allowed for the de-escalation of the military conflict while permitting both sides to interpret the outcome as a return to the status quo ante as each defined it. Thus, Greece had continued to insist that the islet was Greek territory and that Greek fishing vessels had a right to work in its waters. For its part, Turkey had continued to insist that Imia/Kardak was part of the &grey zones8 that were left unsettled by any past treaties. Both sides avoided sending naval vessels into the area, but reserved the right to patrol the waters with Coast Guard ships.

17. (C) According to Gkikas, the current flare-up over Imia appeared to represent nothing new. Asked why the issue was nevertheless heating up again, Gkikas replied that this year had seen a bumper crop of fish in the area, which was luring Greek fishermen into Imia waters. According to Gkikas, the Turks were better able to control their fishermen and did not understand why the Greeks could not keep better tabs on theirs. Turkey was sending its Coast Guard vessels to intercept the Greek fishermen to teach them a lesson.

&EXPLORATORY TALKS8 CONTINUE UNDER THE RADAR

18. (C) Finally, when asked whether Greece and Turkey were discussing ways to de-escalate tensions over Imia/Kardak, Gkikas said that he was not aware of any, but if it were to take place, it would probably be within the framework of the &Exploratory Talks.8 These talks, which he said had taken place several times each year since 2002, aimed at solving the very contentious issue of the delineation of the continental shelf. These talks were &very hush8 to avoid the grandstanding and outside pressure that would

inevitably occur if they were publicized. Thus, both sides tried to remain as low key as possible. The Greek strategy, he explained, was to keep the Turks talking in the hopes of making short-term progress, while in the long term expecting that Turkey would have to change its policies in accordance with EU requirements.

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